

THEOLOGY

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF6-25Provan>

CUCKOOS IN OUR NEST: Truth and Lies About Being Human by Iain Provan. Cascade Books, 2023. 258 pages. Paperback; \$27.00. ISBN: 9781666768701.

According to Provan, retired professor of biblical studies at Regent College, Vancouver, today's most pressing question for Christians is "What is a human being?" He is particularly concerned about contemporary unbiblical responses to this question that have compromised our views. Like the cuckoo (a parasite and an assassin), that sneaks its egg into the nest of another bird that then raises the chicks, these concepts have infiltrated our faith communities. Christians need to be aware of these "cuckoos" and to reflect seriously on what it means to be human.

Provan addresses this problem in fifty short accessible chapters, and offers study guide questions on his website "The Cuckoos Consultancy." His audience is primarily Bible-believing Christians; for more-academic treatments of the topic, he refers readers to his previous books, especially *Seeking What Is Right* (2020), *Seriously Dangerous Religion* (2014), and *Convenient Myths* (2013). As a lecturer on theological anthropology, I did not find anything startlingly new in *Cuckoos in our Nest*, or anything I strongly disagreed with. However, Provan does offer a fresh framing of concerns for the contemporary church and much information for those not familiar with the situations and questions.

The first section of the book, "Finding Out," addresses how we can acquire reliable knowledge about the human person. In a world of dis- and misinformation, finding truth is challenging. Provan respects the process and products of science while acknowledging its imperfections. He notes the need to trust experts and to practice humility; both are uncommon in our world today. The critical question is "Whom shall I admit to my circle of trust, and why?" (p. 12).

The second section is a summary of Christian "Fundamentals" that sets the stage for later arguments. Provan tackles fourteen diverse topics in chapters ranging from "In the Beginning," "Animated Bodies," and "Whole Persons," to "Saved," "Hopeful," and "Confessing." He relies much on creation narratives, with a notable emphasis on embodiment. As bearers of the divine image, humans are whole beings, personal and material—"divinely animated matter" (p. 43)—having great value, dignity and beauty. We are called to be rulers and priests over creation, caring for and developing it. We are also called to be in relationship with God—faith involving more than just belief but total trust, love and obedience, right thinking, and right living. And we are called to live in community with our neighbors, caring for them. Provan is clear that the created order affirms the sanctity of life, gender binaries, and the right-

ful place of sexual intimacy within marriage—a covenant bond between man and woman. In dealing with our fallenness, he interprets idolatry broadly, noting that worship of self is common. He insists that we need to "embrace Christian truth *as a whole*" and "embrace it *as whole persons*" (p. 84).

In the third section, "Furthermore," Provan examines some implications of the Christian view he outlined in Part 2, including fifteen diverse areas of life in chapters such as "Worship," "Rights," "Life," "Death," "Gender," "Children," "Church," "Work," "Creation Care," and "Politics." As embodied beings, we worship with our whole selves and lives, reciting Christian doctrine through singing and meeting together in person. Churches need to practice hospitality but with clear boundaries based on sound doctrine. Being made in God's image, all persons have the right to life, a gift that begins in the womb, does not depend on capacities, and can only be taken away by God. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit so their form should not be arbitrarily changed.

As per the creation mandate, work encompasses all areas of life, including care for creation and political engagement, and is done for the purpose of glorifying God. This may lead to material gains, which are not unbiblical, but wealth should be distributed wisely. With respect to loving one another, biblical love is not sentimental but enables us to "see things as they actually are" (p. 138) and act accordingly. Having compassion on others involves seeing them as image bearers rather than as helpless victims. As priests over creation, we are called to understand our fallen cultures while "very deliberately and counter-culturally" working out "the implications of our Christian anthropology in our lives" (p. 147).

Provan gets to the crux of his argument in the fourth part of the book, titled "Foreign Bodies" (chapters 36 to 50), that names the "cuckoos." These often follow contemporary ideologies that are rooted in traditional philosophies, are incompatible with the biblical story, and are often incomplete and incoherent. Some relate to the acquisition of knowledge; others offer competing "religions." For example, the Science Cuckoo (scientism) claims that science explains everything. The Look Inside Yourself Cuckoo, that follows notions from Romanticism, idealizes nature and encourages people to rely solely on gut feelings. The Freedom to Choose Cuckoo, following Nietzsche and others, emphasizes individualism. Ironically, many people demand their freedom but object to that of others when it affects them. Provan also points out much confusion in contemporary culture; for example, people may follow science for some things but favor feelings or choice when they don't like the science.

The God Cuckoo refers to deism, now popular as moralistic therapeutic deism, a religion that offers only comfort and convenience. The Platonic Cuckoo follows Gnosticism

Book Reviews

in devaluing the material (thus sometimes coexisting with Romanticism and individualism). The Innocence Cuckoo, also influenced by Romanticism, looks back to a state of precivilizational bliss (in fact, ancient cultures were often violent and did not live in harmony with their environment); we are all basically good and can trust our feelings. The Information Cuckoo values narrow and practical education only, devaluing wisdom. Provan insists that good education has a strong social component and, therefore, should never be virtual.

Closer to home, the Worship Cuckoo distorts church liturgies. There is minimal scriptural content in sermons and songs, and singing is more of a concert than a communal activity: “one finds oneself singing, more than once, a composition that did not have very much to say to begin with” (p. 196). The Justice Cuckoo, sometimes emphasizing individual rights, sometimes nature, sometimes utilitarianism, flounders because it has no grounding. Similarly, the Revolution Cuckoo overvalues social justice and group identity, and neglects individual responsibility.

Provan is creative and overall concurs with much broadly conservative thinking on contemporary disagreements. At times he is a bit dogmatic and too general; I would prefer a more nuanced approach with further detail and illustrations. For example, what does “unbiblical” mean? What happens when individual rights to life are in conflict? Should children obey abusive parents? I was also disappointed that a biblical scholar seldom addressed the complexities of interpretation. Provan also paid little attention to spiritual experience, common to contemplative and charismatic streams of Christianity. To be fair, he acknowledges the downside of short chapters; however, I wonder if he simply tried to include too much, sacrificing depth for breadth.

Nevertheless, *Cuckoos in Our Nest* offers an excellent introduction and overview of important questions that all Christians need to contemplate. I recommend it to those unfamiliar with or overwhelmed by contemporary cultural problems; it is also a good resource for students and Bible-study groups.

Reviewed by E. Janet Warren (MD, PhD), lecturer at Tyndale University and independent scholar in theology, Hamilton, ON.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF6-25Campbell>

THE PROBLEM OF ANIMAL PAIN by Victoria Campbell, Elements in the Problems of God Series, Michael L. Peterson, ed. Cambridge University Press, 2023. 77 pages including bibliography. Paperback; \$20.00. ISBN: 9781009270670.

In an era when the pet population surpasses the number of human children in some major cities, a renewed interest has been sparked in the relationship between the pain and suffering faced by animals and Christian theology. In the latest of the Cambridge “Elements in the Problems of God”

series, Victoria Campbell, with doctorates in chemistry and theology and ordained by the Global Methodist Church, tackles the issue of animal pain through theological and scientific lenses. Recent years have seen excellent book-length treatments from philosophers and theologians, but few science-focused works. This very short contribution (only 63 pages) provides brief, often bullet-pointed, summaries of the problem of animal pain and of some responses, as well as providing her novel thesis, one based on the neurophysiology and ethology of natural pain mitigation.

As most philosophers and theologians who engage animal pain and suffering do, Campbell opens with William Rowe’s classic argument from 1979 “against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God” (p. 2) based on the idea of profound suffering in nature over billions of years of evolutionary history. If God exists and can prevent widespread and unnecessary suffering among created beings that are not themselves moral agents, why does he not do it?

Nearly all the major theistic responses to this question are summarized and evaluated, quite succinctly and (mostly) effectively. Campbell outright rejects the Neo-Cartesian premise that animals cannot feel pain; there is too much scientific proof that they can. She finds other arguments have their merits but are still insufficient, including “corruption of creation theodicies” (p. 15), in which pre-human, demonic forces caused primordial chaos, and those theodicies addressing animal afterlife or “saint-making theodicies” (p. 20), in which suffering is redeemed in an animal afterlife. Additionally, the author’s treatment of chaos theory and kenosis is somewhat limited compared to recent scholarship, but her take on the strengths and weaknesses of arguments based on these ideas seems reasonable, at least as she frames them.

The crux of Campbell’s theodicy seeks to affirm that animal pain exists, that an omnipotent and omniscient God also exists and is responsible for its presence, and that God is concerned for animals and cares lovingly for all creatures. Much of her argument is predicated on our knowledge of pain perception, particularly in vertebrates, the value of pain for survival and healthy longevity, and how natural means of pain mitigation reflect a loving, benevolent God. Campbell refutes arguments posed by Richard Dawkins and others that untold pain has plagued evolutionary history with incalculable cruelty, with her contention that about 99.5% of all species “will never experience the emotional distress associated with suffering” and “lack the physiological capacity to perceive pain” (p. 38).

Additionally, the author finds predation to be a means in nature to provide healthy ecosystems and to mitigate chronic pain or illness in animals. It is often the weak, injured, and infirm that are hunted, and the relatively quick death of prey species is mitigated by release of catecholamines and opioids that provide a sort of natural